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SPEECH

OF

Jeremiah MR. CLEMENS, OF ALABAMA,

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES, DEC. 10, 1851,

ON THE RESOLUTION OF MR. SEWARD RELATIVE TO LOUIS KOSSUTH.

Mr. CLEMENS said:

Mr. PRESIDENT: I regret very sincerely that this resolution was introduced. It is painful to do anything seemingly discourteous; and as I must oppose the adoption of this and all similar resolutions, I should greatly have preferred that the especial champions of Louis Kossuth had been content to leave him in the hands of the people, without attempting to commit the Government to any of his schemes for revolutionizing Europe.

I have listened, Mr. President, with great attention to all that has been said in this debate, and if I have been convinced of nothing else, I am at least satisfied that the resolution on your table furnishes a most excellent subject for speech-making. It possesses the peculiar advantage, that the less we know about it, the better we can talk upon it. We may then give free reins to the imagination, and fancy can supply all that is needed to give beauty to a sentence or symmetry to the whole discourse. A great man bent, but not broken by misfortune; an exile pleading the cause of his bleeding country; a gallant people, struggling for freedom against overwhelming odds, overpowered, crushed for a time, but only waiting for a ray of hope, a word of sympathy, to rise again upon their oppressors: all these are themes upon which even a dull man might grow eloquent. The misfortune is, that so much of it is *fancy*; so little is *fact*. Understand the friends of Kossuth to base his claims to a public reception by Congress, partly upon the assumed fact that he is a republican in principle, and has been the great disseminator of republican sentiments throughout Europe; and I have heard, I must confess with some regret, that he was expected to *liberalize* still more the already liberal ideas prevailing upon this continent. In other words, that he is to give lessons to the descendants of the patriots of '76, and teach this benighted land the rudiments of civil liberty. Sir, I think it well enough to inquire, before we enter his school, when he became a republican? If I have read the history of that struggle aright, it was not until defeat and misfortune had overtaken him. In the zenith of his power—in the pride of his high place as Dictator of Hungary, he saw no beauty in universal equality, and knelt at no altar erected to freedom. The contest in which he was engaged was not a contest between despotism and republicanism. It was a war of races. Kossuth and his associates were the oppressors, not the oppressed. So far from rebelling against the Emperor of Austria, they petitioned him, in the humblest terms, not for liberty, not for the security of their own rights, *but for aid to enable them to keep another people in subjection*. I have that petition before me. A short extract from it will enable the Senate to

determine how far the Magyars at that day deserved the character of republicans:

From a Memorial presented to the Archduke by Kossuth and the Hungarian Ministry, July 4th, 1848.

"If his highness the Archduke John will bestow a careful attention upon all that we have just said, he cannot but be convinced of the true character of the rebellion of those States, which make great pretensions of fidelity to the Sovereign, whilst violating the royal authority, he cannot but perceive that even their offer of joining Austria is merely a feigned pretext, in order to give at the crisis of the struggle such a superiority to the Slavish element in Austria that, after thus completely paralyzing the German element, and undermining the Austrian throne, the empire shall be split up into independent Slavish kingdoms, and the very existence of the Austrian Imperial House shall be thus buried.

"And yet loyalty and attachment to the King is so deeply rooted in the heart of the Hungarian nation, that the Illyrian rebels are well aware, that in openly exhibiting their intentions, they will not meet any sympathy. They have therefore come forward in the spirit of reaction, as the pseudo-heroes of the royal authority, and against the Hungarian nation, who have not attacked the royal power, for whom a legal independence and a constitutional administration is not a recent grant, but an ancient right, sanctioned by innumerable royal oaths—against the Hungarian nation, which at this present moment, when almost every throne in civilized Europe is tottering, remains not only the firmest, but the only firm prop of the Austrian throne. This feeling and this experience have led us to request the kind assistance of his Highness the Archduke John with respect to the Illyrian rebellion."

* * * * *

"The disloyal rebels actually boast of the support of the offended ruling House itself! And when we requested his Majesty, in order to enlighten the unhappy and deceived people, by his own handwriting, to let the people know that his Majesty disapproves of the Rebellion, and is determined to maintain, in all their integrity, the solemnly affirmed inviolability of the Hungarian Crown and the authority of the laws, the leaders of the rebels deceived the people by declaring that this has not been done voluntarily on the part of his Majesty, but that it is merely an unwilling expression, extorted by the Hungarian Ministry, through means of compulsion."

The Illyrian rebels, against whom Kossuth so humbly petitioned the aid of the King, had demanded, and were struggling to obtain, some small portion of the natural rights of man, and the war which finally ended in the subjugation of Hungary was begun by the Magyars to keep the Slavonian race in subjection—a people every way their equals, and who, if we are to judge from the different character of the petitions presented by them, seem to me to have been far better entitled to the sympathies of a free people than Kossuth and his associates.

I have read the petition of the Magyars; let me now call the attention of the Senate to that of their antagonists:

"Emperor, if you reject our prayers, we shall know how to vindicate our liberty without you; and we prefer to die heroically, like a Slavonian people, rather than to bear any longer such a yoke as is imposed upon us by an Asiatic horde, from whom we have nothing good to receive or to learn. Emperor, know that we prefer, if we must choose between them, the knout of the Russians to the insolence of the Magyars. We will not, on any terms, belong to the Magyars. Remember, that if Croatia forms but a thirty-fifth part of your empire, the Croatians constitute a third of your whole infantry."

Sir, the men who uttered such sentiments deserved to be free. They are words fit to be spoken by freemen, and I must be excused if I cannot feel any extraordinary enthusiasm in the cause of a man who sought to hold them in bondage. The question with me is, not whether he preaches freedom and equality now, when he is a wanderer and an exile, but rather what was his practice when power was in his hands, and when to have surrendered that power would have been indeed a merit worthy of a world's admiration. The task of tracing the history of that period affords me no pleasure; but when I am called upon, as the representative of a sovereign State, to aid in conferring on any individual an extraordinary honor, it is my duty to ascertain how far that honor is deserved. What, then, was his course during the whole progress of the memorable struggle in which he was engaged? Did he ever at any time give utterance to a republican sentiment? On the contrary, was not his whole course that of a determined and haughty oppressor? When the demands of the

Sclavonians were rejected by the House of Austria, and they proposed to join their forces to his, upon the sole condition that he should guaranty them equal rights and equal privileges, his reply was as haughty and imperious as any ever uttered by the most absolute despot to the humblest slave:

“There are three principles which must prove as a basis to *any conciliation*, and in regard to which WE SHALL CONCEDE NOTHING, ON ANY CONDITION WHATEVER, for it would amount to committing suicide with our own hands:

“1st. The unity of the State.

“2d. The integrity of the territory of the State as it has existed for centuries.

“3d. THE SUPREMACY OF THE MAGYAR ELEMENT, acquired one thousand years ago by the armed hand, the foundation of our autonomy, and consecrated by the use of the Magyar as the diplomatic language.”

This was on the 10th of June, 1849, only two months before the armies of Hungary were annihilated—Görgy a prisoner and Kossuth a fugitive in the dominions of the Turk. Even at that late moment *the supremacy of the Magyar element* was announced as an indispensable basis of any conciliation; and it thus becomes apparent that the right to enslave others rather than the right to be free themselves, constituted the main object of the war. The supremacy of the Magyar element was the leading idea, and much of the sympathy and enthusiasm which the advent of Kossuth has excited in this republican land might well have been reserved for worthier objects. I expect to be told, that whatever may have been his former sentiments he is now a republican in feeling and principle. Indeed the Senator from Massachusetts has already informed us that he has dared to utter such sentiments within the shadow of the throne of England. I have not so read his speeches. I have read a great deal in praise of the British constitution—nothing against the hereditary King and the hereditary Nobility which disgrace it. British freedom is not freedom, as we understand it, and praises of the British constitution do not furnish the highest evidence of a clear conception of the principles of civil liberty. At all events, if we concede all that is claimed for him now, we must still bear in mind that he is only a recent convert. As long as there was a hope of his maintaining an iron rule over a people far more numerous than his own, republicanism never entered his thoughts. There is not a solitary paper emanating from him or his associates during the continuance of the war which does not establish clearly and conclusively that no one of them ever dreamed of the formation of a republic. The language of Count Pulzsky is too explicit to leave a doubt upon this point:

“The most current *misrepresentation* of the Hungarians is, that they are *Republicans*, and that they have proclaimed the *Republic* in such of the Hungarian counties as are in their power, which now comprise almost all the Hungarian territory. This assertion is often unwarily echoed by the friends of the Hungarians, who, considering that the Queen of England maintains amicable relations with the Republic of the United States, with the Republic of France, and the Republic of Switzerland, are not altogether horrified at the Republican appellation. But the real state of the matter is, that the Hungarians ARE NOT REPUBLICANS, and that the *Republic has not been proclaimed anywhere in Hungary.*”

There is more, much more, to the same effect, but it is not needful for me to refer to it. As an individual, I am willing to concede to Kossuth whatever of merit he can justly claim; but I am not willing to say by my vote, or otherwise, that I regard him as a purer patriot than Washington—a greater statesman than Jefferson, or a more skillful General than Jackson. There are living men now within the limits of this city whom I look upon as altogether his superiors. I am not one of those to whose vision it is said “distance lends enchantment.” I respect rather that greatness which is near me—which I do not have to take upon the uncertain reports of others. If the nearness of the object should disclose infirmities—if dark spots or weak points should be

revealed by it, I can still revere what is good and appreciate what is great, without looking for a perfection which is denied to man. I can kneel among the rank weeds at the base of a lofty mountain and worship the grandeur of the Almighty's work, without remembering the petty or the worthless things around me.

One of the most serious mistakes which has crept into this discussion, is the confident assumption that Kossuth is "the invited guest of the Nation." I deny it, broadly and explicitly. If he ever read the resolution under which he came, he could not possibly have so understood it. That resolution was carefully and deliberately drawn by the Senator from Mississippi, [Mr. FOOTE,] whose knowledge of language is familiar to us all, and who, we all know, is not addicted to the use of words the full import of which he does not understand. It is in these words:

A Resolution for the relief of Louis Kossuth and his Associates, Exiles from Hungary.

Whereas the people of the United States sincerely sympathize with the Hungarian exiles, Kossuth and his associates, and fully appreciate the magnanimous conduct of the Turkish Government, in receiving and treating these noble exiles with kindness and hospitality: and, if it be the wish of these exiles to emigrate to the United States, and the will of the Sultan to permit them to leave his dominions: Therefore,

Be it resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the President of the United States be and he hereby is requested to authorize the employment of some one of the public vessels which may now be cruising in the Mediterranean, to receive and convey to the United States the said Louis Kossuth and his associates in captivity.

I need not say in this Senate, that it is impossible to construe the word "emigrate" into "guest." All that the resolution says, all that it meant to say, is, that if he and his associates chose to come here *as settlers*—if they chose to seek an *asylum* here, we would furnish them with the means of transportation. I am willing to admit further, that by the passage of that resolution we tacitly pledged ourselves to provide them homes when they did come; but certainly no ingenuity can give to it a broader construction than that. He was not invited as a guest. He was not invited at all; but simply informed that if he desired to come among us *as an emigrant*, the means of reaching our shores would be placed at his disposal.

MR. FOOTE. Did the Senator read the whole resolution?

MR. CLEMENS. The preamble is the important part, but the Senator can have both. [Mr. C. then read the resolution, as given above.]

It will be observed, that the resolution refers not to Kossuth alone, but "his associates" are connected with him throughout. If he is our guest, they are equally so, and entitled to an equally honorable reception. Further, the resolution does not authorize the President to send a national vessel specially for them, but simply to direct their reception on board of one that might be at the time cruising in the vicinity.

MR. FOOTE. That is all we intended.

MR. CLEMENS. Certainly. So I understood then, and understand now.

I do not know, Mr. President, that it is expected in any quarter to make political capital out of the movements which preceded and accompanied the landing of the Hungarian Governor, and certainly I attribute no such purpose to the Senator from Mississippi; but I have heard a great deal of that "swelling tide of public sympathy," which we are warned not to disregard. We have been told that *the people* have received Kossuth, and Congress dare not turn their backs upon him. I propose neither to turn my back nor my face upon him. I propose to leave him in the hands of the people. If they choose to

get up pageants in his honor; if they choose to carry him in procession from city to city and village to village, it is no concern of mine, and I shall not interfere with so harmless an amusement. But it is a different matter when the Senate of the United States is asked to take part in it. I have been able to find nothing in the history of this man—nothing in his whole career, which demands such an honor at our hands. If it is a mere political speculation, it is so much the more to be reprobated. We are not altogether without example in our own land, to which it may be instructive to refer. Not many years since there was a struggle for freedom on the southwestern border of the Republic—a struggle which finally brought an empire into the Union. When the successful hero of that revolution landed upon our shores, not as a fugitive, but crowned with the wreaths of victory, who ever dreamed of inviting him here to receive the homage of Congress? Sir, he was bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh. He had shed his best blood in his youth, in defence of our land. In riper years, he had accomplished a successful revolution, redeemed a people from bondage, and brought an empire to lay at our feet; but for him there was no Congressional homage—no resolution of welcome. Sir, I am afraid that we are sometimes inclined to overlook the merits of our own kindred, and unduly exalt those who have less claim upon our sympathies. We can intercede with Turkey for the Hungarian—with France for the Arab—with England for the Irishman; but not a word is spoken here of the fifty sons of America who were murdered in Cuba. We hear nothing of national vessels sent to the coast of Africa to redeem from bondage our own citizens, banished to this inhospitable shore, for no sin but that of loving liberty well enough to fight for it in another land than our own.

Mr. President, I have yet another and a graver objection than any yet urged to the passage of this resolution. Since the landing of Kossuth in England, evidence has been piled upon evidence that he seeks this land for political purposes—that he comes not as an emigrant, but as an agitator. I know the Senator from Mississippi has denied that the speeches of Kossuth will bear this interpretation. That Senator surely could not have read those speeches with his usual care and attention. I read from Kossuth's London speech:

“When I declared,—‘Let not remain barren your sympathy; help us to carry that noble cause to a happy issue; you have the power, so help,’—when I spoke that, I intended not to ask England to take up arms for the restoration of Hungary to independence and liberty. No, gentlemen, that is the affair of Hungary itself; we will provide for our own freedom. (Hear, hear.) All I wish is, that the public opinion of England may establish it to be a ruling principle of the politics of Europe to acknowledge the right of every nation to dispose of its own internal concerns, and not to give a charter to the Czar to dispose of the fate of nations—(cheers), and so *not to allow* the interference of Russia in the domestic concerns either of Hungary, or of whatever other nations on the continent—(hear, hear,) because the principles of freedom are in harmony, and I love—I am interested in—the freedom of all other countries as well as of my own. (Hear, hear.) My lord and gentlemen, these are the words which I again and again will repeat here in England, and *there in the United States*, from a most honored member of which I have had the honor to hear principles which quite once carried into effect, would and will give liberty to the world. I have heard it proclaimed from an honored citizen of the United States, the honored object of the sympathy, and confidence of a great part of his countrymen, even a candidate to become the Chief Magistrate of the United States—I have heard, in answer to my appeal, declare that he believes the younger brother of the English race very heartily will give his hand to England to protect the oppressed nations not admitting interference with their domestic affairs.”

Mr. FOOTE. I will ask from what paper the Senator is reading?

Mr. CLEMENS. The New York *Courier and Enquirer*. I shall read something stronger from other papers directly. Now, sir, it was not in London only, but everywhere in England, and since his arrival here, he has proclaimed himself a political missionary. His avowed object is to induce England and

the United States to combine for the purpose of preventing Russian interference with the affairs of Europe. That is, we are to prevent Russia from interfering by interfering ourselves. We are to abandon the policy of Washington and his successors—forget all the lessons they have transmitted to us, and erect the United States into a kind of general guardian for the nations of Europe. I know he speaks of assuming a threatening attitude merely, and predicts that will be sufficient to overawe the Emperor of Russia. But suppose he should be mistaken in that prediction: we would then be fully committed to war. If he possesses one tithe of the foresight which has been ascribed to him, he must be aware that an interference begun by threats must be ended by cannon-balls and bayonets. It is childish to talk of trammeling the action of Russia by threats uttered on this side of the Atlantic. She would laugh your threats to scorn. She would tell you that you have enough to do to manage your own concerns at home, without traveling beyond the Atlantic to interfere with the concerns of other nations. She would tell you to be careful that in traversing the world to give liberty to other nations, you did not lose your own. She would remind you that but recently a bitter sectional strife was raging in your midst, which threatened at one time to shatter your Confederacy into atoms—that the embers of that strife were still unquenched, and that it was the part of wisdom to secure internal peace before you engaged in external war; that when you had removed all the causes of bitterness at home—when you had fully cemented your own empire—it would then be time enough to say that the paw of the Russian bear should be planted on no soil without your consent. Such, sir, would be the answer of Russia, and such the answer we should deserve. To indulge in the use of threats towards Russia is either to cover ourselves with ridicule, or involve the country in war; and that, indeed, is the true purpose of Kossuth. Scarcely veiled in England, it has been almost openly proclaimed in America. Here is his New York speech:

"Then what is the motive of my being here at this very time? The motive, citizens, is that your generous act of my liberation has raised the conviction throughout the world that this generous act of yours is but the manifestation of your resolution to throw your weight into the balance where the fate of the European continent is to be weighed. You have raised the conviction throughout the world, that by my liberation you were willing to say, 'Ye oppressed nations of old Europe's continent, be of good cheer, the young giant of America stretches his powerful arm over the waves, ready to give a brother's hand to your future.' So is your act interpreted throughout the world. * * * * *

What is the source of this apparition unparalleled in mankind's history? The source of it is, that your generous act of my liberation is taken by the world for the revelation of the fact that the United States are resolved not to allow the despots of the world to trample on oppressed humanity. It is hence that my liberation was cheered, from Sweden down to Portugal, as a ray of hope. It is hence that even these nations which most desire my presence in Europe now, have unanimously told me, 'Hasten on, hasten on to the great, free, rich, and powerful people of the United States, and bring over its brotherly aid to the cause of your country, so intimately connected with European liberty;' and here I stand to plead the cause of the solidarity of human rights before the great Republic of the United States. * * * * *

"Having thus expounded my aim, I beg leave to state that I came not to your glorious shores to enjoy a happy rest—I came not with the intention to gather triumphs of personal distinction, but because an humble petitioner, in my country's name, as its freely chosen constitutional chief, humbly to entreat your generous aid; and then it is to this aim that I will devote every moment of my time with the more assiduity, the more restlessness, as every moment may bring a report of events which may call me to hasten to my place on the battle-field, where the great, and I hope the last battle will be fought between Liberty and Despotism,—a moment marked by the finger of God to be so near, that every hour of delay of your generous aid may prove fatally disastrous to oppressed humanity."

This language leaves no room for conjecture. His object is to secure the armed assistance of England and the United States. And now let us inquire for what purpose that assistance is sought? To establish liberty in Hungary?

No; but the supremacy of the Magyar race. The exiles who have come among us have probably imbibed, and have certainly proclaimed, republican sentiments; but who believes that such sentiments have found a home in the bosom of the Hungarian people? It has been their boast for ages that they constituted the firmest prop of the Austrian throne. It is a well-known historical fact that they have clung to their institutions with a tenacity even beyond that with which the Mohammedan clings to the Koran. It is those who have remained at home, constituting the vast majority of the population, who must give character to the institutions a successful revolt may enable them to establish; and who doubts they will return to that constitution and form of government for which they have manifested so decided a preference? Our aid, then, if given at all, will not be given to a republic but to a monarchy.

The Senator from Mississippi [Mr. FOOTE] tells us that we ought not to shrink with alarm at the idea of a controversy with Russia. I have seen no manifestation of any great apprehension on the part of any one here. But it by no means follows that, because we do not happen to feel any great alarm at the idea of that controversy with Russia, we should provoke that controversy. It by no means follows that because we are not afraid of Russia, we should go to war with Russia. She has a right to the same courtesy at our hands that other nations have. She has a right not to be insulted. If this resolution should be adopted, under all the attending circumstances, and the Emperor of Russia has the feelings of a man, he must believe—he will believe—that we have offered him an unnecessary and causeless insult. To demonstrations on the part of the people he has no right to object; but acting in our official capacity, we ought to be cautious how we do things calculated to disturb our friendly relations with foreign Powers; and, above all, we should refrain from giving our public approbation to an individual who has told us openly before landing on our shores—who tells us now—that his object is to agitate—to excite enmity against a nation with whom we are on terms of amity; who tells us, further, that his object will not be accomplished unless he can obtain from the Government of the United States a sanction and approval of his mission. When the news reached Governor Kossuth that the resolution introduced by the Senator from Mississippi had been withdrawn, he saw proper to become highly offended, and assumed to deliver a lecture to a Philadelphia committee upon the conduct of Congress. Listen to his reply to that committee, and then judge how far we can now be justified in inviting him here:

“Kossuth said he was extremely rejoiced at this demonstration on the part of Philadelphia, and that he felt the highest gratification in being thus honored by the glorious corporation of that renowned city. Before he left Europe, one of the pleasures he had promised himself was to meet and mingle with the citizens of that great city where the Declaration of Independence had been proclaimed; and he felt now particularly anxious to visit the hallowed spot where that immortal charter had been adopted. But he went on to say, that at the present moment it was quite impossible for him to declare at what time he could go there, and that, indeed, it was not certain that he could go there at all. His object in visiting this country was not a personal one—he did not come to promote any selfish purpose, and he could not, therefore, do anything that was calculated merely to gratify himself. His object was to promote the great cause of liberty throughout the world, and especially in Hungary; and while he was sure the people of the United States sympathized in that object, he could not but say that he was deeply distressed at the action which had been taken by (one branch of) Congress. He had the highest respect and regard for Congress—he recognized it as the exponent of the national will, and in view of what it had done, his own movements were necessarily embarrassed. Whether he would be content to go beyond New York he could not now say; but he was free to declare that had the proceedings in Congress, to which he had adverted, reached him before he left Europe, he would have hesitated about coming to this country at all.

“The reason why I say this, is, that though I am fully aware of the circumstance that in the United States it is the public opinion of the people which decides in the last instance on public

affairs, and though I must confess that I have received here in New York such a manifestation of the sympathy of the people as gives me hope and consolation, still I regard myself invited to this country by an act of Congress, initiated in the Senate. Now, had I known that in the same place where I was invited, the same body would now decline to bid me welcome, I would have thought that I was not a welcome guest; so much the more as the President of the United States has formally invited the Congress in his message to consider what steps are to be taken to receive the man for whom he has sent a frigate to Asia, complying with the will of the same body in which now a resolution of no further political tendency—the simple resolution to bid me a welcome—was withdrawn on account of an unexpected opposition. Under such circumstances I would not have wished to intrude.

“And as it was, with the utmost gratitude to all who bestowed on him such marks of kindness as the city of Philadelphia had offered, and especially with sentiments of sincere regard for Philadelphia and its citizens, he must defer for a day or two any positive reply to the request which had been made to him.”

Had the proceedings of Congress reached Kossuth before he left Europe he would have hesitated to come to this country. And why? Was there anything in those proceedings disrespectful to him? Was there a solitary remark made by any Senator on this floor which was not in the highest degree eulogistic of him and his character? Was there not everything in the proceedings of that day to gratify his personal vanity? Certainly; and there must have been some other cause why he would have failed to come to America if he had known what was to transpire. He would not have come here because those proceedings taught him that he could not succeed in engaging the Government of the United States in a war with any foreign Power, and as his mission here looked to that result, and that only. As he sought no personal sympathy, no personal protection, he would have directed his steps to some quarter where the prospect of obtaining armed aid for Hungary was more cheering. Sir, I protest against this intervention with the domestic concerns of other nations. I protest against this resolution, because it commits us in some degree to the wild schemes of an enthusiast; it sanctions the arrogance which rejects the home we offered, and demands as a right that we should offer in exchange the blood and the treasure of our people.



